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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 002517

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/01/2016

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SUBJECT: WHILE ARRESTS SUBSIDE, SARG CONTINUES TO PRESSURE  
DAMASCUS-BEIRUT DECLARATION SIGNATORIES TO WITHDRAW THEIR  
SUPPORT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)  
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11. (C) SUMMARY: While the arrests of Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD) signatories appear to have subsided for now, post contacts report that the SARG continues to pressure DBD signatories to withdraw their support of the Declaration.

In an attempt to quell international reaction to the crackdown and to divide and weaken the opposition, the SARG is utilizing a variety of tactics, carried out mainly by State Security officials, including pressuring signatories to publicly condemn the international community's recent criticism of Syria, offering carrots and sticks to organization leaders to delink their individual signatures from their respective organizations, and distributing an anti-DBD statement for intellectuals and activists to sign.  
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) NO NEW ARRESTS, WHILE DETAINEES REMAIN AT AADRA: Following the arrest wave of May 14-18 (reftel), the SARG has for now ceased arresting signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration. Ten detained signatories remain incarcerated at Aadra prison outside Damascus, where they have been refused access to their lawyers since May 25. The men are being housed in three separate groups, distributed among the general Aadra prison population. Prominent human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni also continues his hunger strike but has not been joined by the other detainees.

13. (C) SARG TURNS TO STATE SECURITY TO PRESSURE ACTIVISTS: Instead of relying on further arrests, the SARG is now using its security apparatus to threaten and cajole activists into distancing themselves from the DBD. Post contacts report that many signatories have been subjected to further harassment and/or interrogation by General Intelligence Directorate (GID) State Security officers, who have been relying on a variety of tactics to persuade signatories to withdraw their support of the DBD.

14. (C) One tactic SARG officials are using is to convince civil society activists to issue statements condemning "foreign intervention in Syrian domestic affairs," defined by the pro-SARG press as UNSCR 1680, as well as the EU and USG statements condemning the detention of DBD signatories. Opposition activist and former Damascus Spring detainee Walid al-Bunni told Poloff May 31 that Vice-President Najah al-Attar contacted signatory Hussein al-Oudat and asked that 25 of the signatories denounce foreign interference and admit that the DBD signatories did not intend for the statement to be published while UNSCR 1680 was being debated, in exchange for the release of the detained signatories. Human rights lawyer Khalil Maatouk claimed that the SARG finds itself in a

difficult situation following the European Union's statement condemning the arrests and may be trying to use activists' statements condemning foreign interference in order to defuse international tensions over the arrests. Human rights lawyer Haithem al-Maleh (who did not sign the DBD) told Poloff May 24 that the SARG had approached the Damascus Declaration group (as distinct from the DBD group), asking them to publish a statement asserting that the signatories of the DBD had not considered the negative implications of the DBD, particularly in terms of the so-called "foreign intervention." According to contacts, this tactic has failed so far, with signatories refusing to condemn the international community's statements on Syria.

15. (C) Another tactic the SARG continues to use is offering carrots and sticks to the leaders of Syria's unregistered human rights organizations in order to persuade them to publicly declare they had signed the declaration as individuals and not on behalf of their respective organizations. National Organization for Human Rights in Syria (NOHR) president Ammar Qurrabi commented to Poloff May 30 that the SARG is intent on discrediting members of the opposition, making them look wishy-washy and like "liars." The defense lawyers of signatories Anwar Bunni, Nidal Darwish, and Mohammed Mur'i, all currently in detention, were told by State Security officials that their clients could be released if the three men agree to sign such a statement. Qurrabi, who has been called in for interrogation by State Security three times over the last week, acquiesced to signing a similar statement after Fuad Nassif Kheirbek, the director of State Security Internal Branch (Branch 251), threatened to arrest him, Maatouk, and fellow NOHR activist Habib Issa if he did not sign. Qurrabi signed, citing the desire to protect the rest of the NOHR membership from persecution. Qurrabi was also asked to write a letter to

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President Bashar al-Asad on behalf of NOHR, asking for the release of the ten signatories and admitting their guilt, but refused to sign. Qurrabi noted that another organization, the Arab Organization for Human Rights, had complied with that request and speculated that their decision was due to the detention of two of their members. Human rights activist Rezan Zeitunah harshly criticized the organizations for giving into the security services' wishes, questioning why anyone fearing arrest and detention would even work in the opposition, adding that it was unfair to those already in detention.

16. (C) SOME DBD SIGNATORIES DENYING PARTICIPATION UNDER DURESS: Qurrabi and Maleh both noted that a number of signatories have since publicly and privately denied signing the statement. While Maleh accepted as plausible that a number of individuals had been included without their permission, Qurrabi felt that these denials were being made under pressure from State Security and to avoid arrest or long-term detention. Qurrabi cited the example of a number of individuals briefly detained by security authorities May 14-20 who had made such denials to SARG authorities. They later admitted to their friends that their denials were essentially false but had been made because they wanted to avoid going to jail. SARG press sources have publicized such denials: the pro-SARG Cham Press news website quoted judicial sources as saying "many signatories denied that they had signed the petition." The sources added that there will be no more arrests in this matter, because "some did not read the petition and were pushed to sign it by others and some denied any link with the petition." However, such assurances of an end to the arrest wave have not ended activists' fear of security-service harassment, as a number of post contacts who signed the DBD have declined to meet with Emboffs, citing security concerns.

17. (C) SARG DISTRIBUTES NEW ANTI-DBD STATEMENT: According to post contacts, Dr. Nizar Mayhoub, the head of the Syrian Public Relations Society, a SARG-controlled "NGO" (operating

under the wing of the Ministry of Information), is circulating a draft statement criticizing the DBD for signature by "Syrian intellectuals." The draft accuses the DBD signatories of supporting US intervention in the region, calls UNSCR 1680 a violation of the UN Charter, and criticizes the EU for ignoring human rights violations by Israel and the U.S. in Palestine and Iraq. It closes by asking the Syrian President to "be generous enough to issue his orders to release detainees of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration." Qurrabi added that the statement is being circulated among activists, writers, and intellectuals with close SARG and security service ties. Some of them have approached him and a number of other DBD signatories to ask them to join the condemnation of the DBD. (NOTE: During his meeting with Poloff, Qurrabi received two calls from "activist" Abdullah al-Fawwaz, strongly encouraging him to sign the condemnation. Fawwaz is the husband of Rihab Bitar, the leader of the Free Democratic Alliance (FDA) party, which is widely considered to be SARG-sanctioned and possibly even SARG-financed.) Bitar and human rights activist Abdulkarim al-Rihawi were among those names included as signatories to the draft statement.

18. (C) COMMENT: The use of a palette of strategies to discredit the DBD and its signatories demonstrates the strength and sophistication of SARG security agencies and the weakness of the opposition in failing to withstand these efforts. The successful attempt to divide and conquer human rights organizations and their memberships and the success of pressure on the activists to deny their participation show that for now, fear and intimidation are prevailing. If the SARG succeeds sufficiently with these tactics in discrediting the DBD by smearing its supporters, it may feel more relaxed about dispensing with the trumped-up charges and finding a pretext for releasing those who have been detained. Some of our savviest contacts, however, gauging the current hard-line posture the regime has embraced, are not at all confident that the regime will proceed in such a benevolent fashion. While the aggressive pressure tactics by the security services, short of detention, on other signatories and affiliated organizations could indicate the regime is considering a way to defuse the situation and mute international criticism, it could also be an indication that, using all kinds of tactics, it will not cease its efforts until it has effectively destroyed the legitimacy of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration and that of every one of its Syrian signatories. For good measure, those who were arrested will serve out their time in jail. It will become

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more clear in the coming days which path the regime will opt for.  
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